

***“And I’m in another world”. A qualitative examination of the experience of participating in creative arts groups in Palestine.***

**Arts & Health**

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## ***“And I’m in another world”*. A qualitative examination of the experience of participating in creative arts groups in Palestine.**

Background: We examine the experience of participating in creative arts groups for Palestinians living under the shadow of military conflict.

Methods: 14 men and women aged 17-50 were recruited from community creative arts groups to participate in one of three semi-structured group interviews. Interviews explored participants’ perceptions of the creative arts groups, including how they came to participate in the group and how they felt about their involvement.

Results: An inductive thematic analysis identified three central themes: *‘An emptying’*, *‘Growth in the face of challenge’*, and *‘A rare freedom’*. The themes capture the extreme challenges participants faced and the protective effects of the creative arts groups on wellbeing. Participating in creative arts activities, such as writing, drawing, and music, encourages self-expression and release, personal exploration and escapism.

Conclusions: In the face of traumatic experiences, restrictions, and poverty associated with living in an occupied land, creative arts groups can be liberating and support wellbeing.

Keywords: creativity; coping; conflict zones; community arts; mental health and wellbeing

Word count (including references) 4438

## **Background**

The benefits of art, viewing and making, are well established. Across a wide range of populations, art-making can contribute to a deeper understanding of self through a reduction of stress and anxiety levels, psychological recovery, improvement of self-esteem, and personal growth (e.g. Jensen & Bonde, 2018; Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). Art therapy supports the process of acceptance and change and has proved to be helpful in the treatment of psychosocial difficulties (Bone, 2019; Drake, Hastedt, & James, 2016; Eaton, Doherty, & Widrick, 2007; Slayton, D'Archer, & Kaplan, 2010). Creativity provides space for expression and healing during or after the experiences of total devastation, such a genocide and war (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005). By communicating images of traumatic memories in a non-verbal way, art therapy enables the regulation and processing of these experiences. This allows survivors of trauma to distance themselves from experienced emotions and encourage the process of meaning making (Baker, 2006; Schouten, de Niet, Knipscheer, Kleber, & Hutschemaekers, 2015). The current study focuses on daily stressors experienced under political violence in Palestine and, uniquely, examines the experience of participating in creative arts for Palestinian people living under Israeli occupation.

Knowledge about the impact of creative arts groups in conflict zones is limited. A small number of studies depict the benefits of art therapy with refugees who suffered political violence (Rousseau, Singh, Lacroix, Measham, & Jellinek, 2004). Where case studies exist, they are usually written from the perspective of art professionals or clinicians (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005). These accounts present powerful examples of the healing capacity of art and suggest that the creation of safe spaces for expression through visual art, drama, or play, is important.

Much of the research on experiences of political violence and trauma in conflict zones favours the bio-medical approach, which is a construct that some argue undermines the value of social and collective suffering caused by socio-political context (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Giacaman et al., 2011). Trauma discourse in the conflict zones is often reduced to a condition of psychopathology, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005). However, Miller and Rasmussen (2010) point out that this

approach often depoliticises human suffering, reducing the significance of social and cultural aspects of post-conflict adjustment and coping. Traumatic events may be associated with grief, anger, fear, frustration, apathy and loss of faith (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007) which are not a pathology, but common reactions to extremely stressful events (Batniji et al., 2009; Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007). The perception of lack of control over stressful events may intensify feelings or distress, while a sense of control over the situation and knowledge how to deal with it, might lead to improved mental and physical well-being.

The on-going military occupation in Palestine causes deterioration in economic development, displacement, restrictions of movement, human rights violations, continuous humiliation and lack of health services (Batniji et al., 2009; Giacaman et al., 2011). Political violence is deeply embedded in communities, negatively affecting mental health (Ai, Peterson, & Ubelhor, 2002). Palestinians report constant fears, worries and threats to their safety with one in two Palestinians experiencing continuous distress, anxiety and worry (Mataria et al., 2009). The Palestinian context is characterised by high levels of distress particularly for those living in refugee camps (Harsha, Ziq, Ghandour, & Giacaman, 2016).

Many organisations operating in Palestine put focus on clinically recognised psychological therapies, such as psychodynamic interventions and cognitive behavioural therapy (Giacaman, Hussein, Gordon, & Awartani, 2004). While this is beneficial for individual clinical cases of PTSD and other severe mental disorders, social suffering and common reactions to traumatic events risk misdiagnosis, being labelled as a pathology or ignored all together (Batniji et al., 2009). Clinical assessments of suffering after traumatic experiences have been questioned by the local researchers (Rabaia, Nguyen-Gillham, & Giacaman, 2010), who argue that in addition to individual treatments of identified disorders, there is a need for assessments that take into consideration and validate the socio-political injustice. At the same time, studies focusing on creative interventions in Palestine are limited and where they do exist, the focus is on the artistic activities of younger children (Gortner, Rude, & Pennebaker, 2006; Mahamid, Rihani, & Berte, 2015).

The study reported here examines the experience of participating in creative arts groups during a period of political conflict in Palestine, with the aim of adding to the limited literature on the utility of creative interventions to support wellbeing in conflict zones. Our

central research question was: How do people living in occupied Palestine describe their experience of participating in community creative arts groups? Sub questions included: What do members value about participating in these groups? To what extent does participation in creative arts groups support mental health?

## **Research approach and methodology**

We aimed to examine the experience of creative arts group participation for Palestinians living in an area of military conflict. Specifically, we explored how participation supported mental health. We adopted a qualitative approach to understand how creative arts groups support the wellbeing of people living in a conflict zone.

### ***Participants***

Eleven women and three men aged between 17 and 50 years participated in one of three group interviews. The participants were enrolled in community arts groups at one of three Palestinian community centres and were invited to participate through gatekeepers who advertised the research study at each site. These recruitment sites were selected because they used creative arts methods (drawing, targeted expressive arts therapy and music) to support members of the community. The first site (A) was a cultural centre at a refugee camp in (Balata) Nablus, facilitated by a female social worker. The group used drawing to encourage women to express themselves. Seven women, aged between 29 and 50 years, responded to the invitation to participate. As they met the inclusion criteria, all were invited to participate. All participants in site A had been participating in the art sessions for at least one year. The second site (B) was in (Mada centre, Silwan) East Jerusalem. Members of the group met weekly to participate in music activities, including rap, playing instruments and writing lyrics. One woman and two men aged between 17-19 years who had each been participating for 4 years responded to the invitation to participate, met the inclusion criteria and were interviewed from site B. The final site (C) was a counselling centre in East Jerusalem that ran an expressive arts therapy group that combined drawing, movement and writing. Three women and one man aged between 23 and 29 responded to the invitation, met the inclusion

criteria and were interviewed from site C. Participants from Site C had participated weekly for 2 months, since the group was established.

### ***Interviews***

The University of Liverpool Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval and the Palestinian University of Birzeit was consulted on how best to approach the participants. Culturally, Palestinians are reluctant to sign papers, due to suspicion of the further usage of their names. Thus, informed consent was given verbally. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising the data immediately on transcription and using pseudonyms. Data were collected using three group interviews conducted by KJ between May and July 2016. This qualitative approach allowed an in-depth examination of the experiential meaning of participating in arts groups. A semi structured interview guide comprising six open-ended questions that allowed examination of the participants' experiences of participating in a specific creative arts group. For example, participants were asked about how long they had attended the group, their initial motivations for participating, how they felt about the group and how they benefitted. Group interviews lasted between 70 to 90 minutes.

### ***Data analysis***

All interviews were audio recorded, translated and transcribed into English by a professional translator. Transcripts were analysed by the first and second author using an inductive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible method of analysing and describing qualitative data across a range of epistemologies. Transcripts were read thoroughly several times for familiarization and immersion in the data. This was followed by a process of initial descriptive coding to identify meaningful sections of text relevant to the research question. Patterns and repetition within the data set were identified and initial codes were grouped together into meaningful analytic categories that explained larger sections of the data. This more focused coding process permitted a comparison between interpretations and experiences of the participants. Themes were reviewed and refined through a process of discussion and consensus involving all authors to identify three final themes that told an overall story about the data. Audit trails and reflexive memo-ing occurred throughout the research process, to include a record of how thoughts and

ideas developed with increasing emersion with the data. This supported the trustworthiness of the study (Lincon & Guba, 1985).

## Results

We present the results of an exploratory thematic analysis of the participants' experiences of participating in creative arts groups. Three central themes are reported here: *An "emptying"*, *Growth in the face of challenge*, and *A rare freedom*. We explore each theme using extracts from the interviews.

### *An "emptying"*

Participants face significant adversity because of political unrest in Palestine, including displacement, movement restrictions, exposure to violence and bereavement, poverty and unemployment. The experience of distress was a central theme in all three interviews and the creative arts groups provided an outlet for feelings of tension, anxiety and suffering.

*Regarding the stress we go through due to the occupation, we live in very closed houses and under stress. I mean to say we cannot sit outside our homes or see life and the outside world. We are suppressed*

*Your care for and concern about husband, kids and family. All life is tiring.*

Participants identified the activities as way to "*release [our] stresses*". They described arriving at meetings angry, tired, and concerned, and reflected on how, during the sessions, they were able to "*speak out what we have inside us*", "*talk about anything we want and feel relaxed*" and allowed "*the negative energy inside us [gets] out*", or some form of "*emptying*". The creative arts group sessions benefited participants' wellbeing and allowed the men and women to explore their feelings freely through writing, drawing, or music, in a way that conversation might not easily allow. One participant described getting thoughts and feelings out through the process of writing, until there was nothing more to say:

*I enter the room and write and write regardless of what I write ... regardless of the writing mechanisms ... at the end there is nothing and I leave the room.*

Another offered,

*When we start drawing, we express our inner feelings without uttering one word.*

Creative art groups offered the participants positive strategies for coping with constant stress and traumatic experiences. For example, one participant, whose son was murdered by the Israeli army, considered the medication she may have had to take had it not been for the activities and social connection offered by the creative art group.

*Now I started to get out and do things that give me comfort. Instead of taking medicines, handicrafts helped me to get out of this mental state. Handicrafts helped me.*

Similarly, participants from Site B reflected on the more destructive coping methods they may have adopted had they not been engaged in creating music and the self-expression and political activism that writing rap lyrics allowed.

*The main reason for playing music is that it gives comfort. Without it, one will feel that he/she is trapped and stressed and might express himself/herself in other ways that may lead to prison, his/her study or work will be affected or even he might hurt himself/herself.*

*If there isn't a way to express myself through it [rap], I will carry stones and make problems with the police and I will be imprisoned.*

The facilitated creative arts group sessions provided a dedicated space to discharge their emotions, and participants felt more likely to use creative strategies at home, away from the sessions, when they felt tense or upset. Several contextual factors were important to the effectiveness of the creative arts groups in providing relief. The facilitator's sensitivity and their creativity, how they structured the sessions and their ability to create an atmosphere of openness and trust were important, as was the cohesion of the group. The mutual encouragement and sharing of personal experiences among participants was central to the therapeutic experience. The women from Site A, in particular, described the friendships that had developed between group members, describing each other as "*family*" and "*sisters*".



*I may have an experience; others learn from it. She may have an experience and I learn from her. She may advise me and I may advise her. We may talk more and encourage each other more.*

*Our relationship was not strong at the beginning. But now, we learn from other's problems and we have become close friends.*

### ***Growth in the face of challenge***

This theme reflects the personal development facilitated by the creative arts groups, despite the significant adversity participants faced. The following quote demonstrates the socio-cultural challenges many of the participants struggled against and the value of the creative groups as a learning opportunity.

*The sessions we attend build the character of the woman. Women in our society are weak compared to men. Now we can defend our rights and can solve our problems. We learned how to express ourselves and how to build our character, be strong and solve our problems. Through our meetings, we can deal with any subject and with our husbands and those around us. Sometimes, we are exposed to sexual harassment in the street or any kind of harassment. We learned to raise the awareness of our children how to behave if they are exposed to any kind of harassment. We can defend ourselves and not to be prey for anyone or to the enemy that controls us.*

The creative group environment was likened by one participant to an incubator: a safe space where they could express themselves and grow stronger. Participants gained knowledge and skills, both in terms of the specific creative activities and broader life skills. They learnt to listen to others and to empathize, and became more adept at reflecting and expressing themselves, both through creative arts and conversationally. Participants across all three groups described improved confidence owing to their participation in the creative groups. One participant from Site C talked about “*finding new things to know about [herself]*”. Another described being better able to manage the anger that often surfaced alongside them because of the socio-political injustice.

*I was not only a nervous person but very nervous. I mean when I am nervous I explode my anger. For this reason, I came to the centre. ... But after the expressive therapy and after many years in the centre and this course, I improved 80%.*

Participants described transferring these new skills to their home environment. For example, one participant from Site A reflected on changes in her approach to parenting and how her relationship with her children had strengthened:

*I mean that I used to punish and beat them for the smallest thing they may do. Now, I talk to them and understand them.*

### ***A rare freedom***

The final theme captures the sense of freedom and independence associated with participation in creative arts groups in occupied Palestine. The interviews demonstrated the socio-economic impact induced by ongoing political conflict. Participants in Site B spoke about an absence of physical places that they could use to meet safely to relax and socialise. Participants in Site A lived in a refugee camp where houses were very small, unemployment and poverty were high, and there was a high proportion of young families. They described feeling suffocated and their need to express themselves freely:

*We live in very closed houses and under stress. I mean to say, we cannot sit outside home or see life and the outside world. We are suppressed.*

*We are strangulated. I swear to God that we are strangulated. One has to get out what's inside him/her. If we suppress ourselves and not speak out, we will explode.*

Cultural norms also made it difficult for participants to find an outlet for self-expression. This was particularly true for women. The social construction of gender in the context of Palestine means that women commonly experience exclusion, violence, for patriarchal control and female participants voiced the perception of women as “*weak compared to men [in our society]*”. Younger participants also described a culture of obedience to older adults and how this, alongside ongoing political oppression, meant that self-expression was difficult. One participant in Site B said,

*Traditions and habits don't allow us [the young] to talk. Even if we grow older, we remain small in the eyes of those older than us. No opinions are allowed. Expression at schools doesn't exist. Nobody can talk. Only teacher talks.*

The time spent in creative arts group sessions was seen as a “*right of private time*” that participants could use as they wished, without distraction. Across the groups, participants felt safe in the groups and able to speak freely about their fears, uncertainties, daily stresses and emotions. One participant noted:

*We feel safe, we share our secrets and none of us discloses the secret or what we talk about. Nothing takes place inside the room goes outside.*

Creative arts groups allowed participants to escape the challenges they faced because of political oppression. They described “*breathing [through singing the rap]*”, of being “*in another world [when you scribble]*”, of having the freedom to dream and imagine a better reality for themselves and their family.

*When the musician plays, he lives in another world. When playing music, I concentrate. I live in another world.*

*When we draw, we imagine that we are living in beautiful houses in a comfortable place ... The most important thing to me is to draw rooms and beds for my children. I like that each of my children has a room. My home consists of one sitting room, one bedroom, kitchen and bathroom.*

For the young Palestinians in Site B, growing up in an occupied country, creating rap music allowed them to actively respond to the political crisis. They used music as a “*weapon*” and a means of freely voicing their frustrations and fears relating to the daily ramifications of political conflict. By positioning themselves against militarism in their music, they also develop a sense of collective identity.

*I empty my energy in words almost as if the pencil is a weapon.*

*Most of the songs we sing, especially the Rap, are related to the Palestinian cause. We wanted to send a message to the occupier that it arrests people and confiscates lands and does things against human rights. We all direct our work toward the*

*Palestinian issue and the problems, which we cannot speak out because it is difficult to do so. Our situation, it is difficult to utter such things.*

Participation in creative arts groups is liberating for the participants in the shadow of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. For a short time, they are not obliged to speak; they can use this time to be with themselves and one another, and regain some sense of control over their own world, even if only in their imaginations.

## **Conclusions and implications**

We examined the experience of participating in creative arts groups for people living under extreme stress because of the political violence in occupied Palestine. A growing literature supports the use of creative arts to improve mental health (e.g. Bone, 2018; Baker, Metcalf, Varker, & O'Donnell, 2018). However, there is a lack of research focused on the value of creative arts in conflict zones and it is difficult to find studies that qualitatively examine the experience for older children and adults (Kowitt et al., 2016; Rousseau et al., 2004).

Our exploratory study highlights the value of creative arts groups for promoting wellbeing and facilitating personal growth in war contexts, and offering a safe space and a rare opportunity of self-expression. We find that the creative arts groups have a transformative impact on the men and women interviewed. Generating creative works and discovering a creative potential is therapeutic in itself and the sessions contribute to wellbeing by providing the space to relax and to feel safe. The community structure that accompanies the sessions provides new friendships, mutual support and a sense of belonging. Moreover, the creative arts groups have the potential to allow people to build on personal resources, including self-confidence, and provide new methods for self-expression that are protective in coping with the uncertainty and distress that characterises political conflict. Creative arts is a source of escapism. For the women in Site A, drawing gives them freedom to make social connections and to visualise a better future. The youths in Site B value the freedom to express anger and respond to political oppression through rap. For the men and women in Site C, expressive arts encourages free expression of emotions and the creation of

meaning from their experiences. The role of the facilitator is also important and this speaks to the value of a therapeutic alliance.

This study captures the voices of a small group of men and women living in occupied Palestine in three examples of creative arts. Some participants in each group took a more active role in the discussions than others, and checkpoint closures on the day of data collection at Site C meant that several members of the creative arts group were unable to travel to the centre to participate. Yet, the data we have presented shows that these three creative arts groups were protective resources for the men and women interviewed who were dealing with the every-day impact of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This paper demonstrates that creative arts groups have the ability to encourage self-expression, create friendships, and support emotional wellbeing for those living as political refugees. Intra-personal mechanisms of change, such as feelings of mastery, enhanced self-concept, and increased opportunities to practice emotional communication, and social mechanisms, including social interaction, friendship development and community connection, are important process associated with creative arts groups to support wellbeing. There is evidence that community creative arts groups, like those captured in this study, could support the mental health of those living in areas of political violence.

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